

Tips on how to find a research mentor

Finding a research mentor requires a little bit of self-reflection and detective work. A good place to start is to think about what research topics you might find interesting. For inspiration you might want to consider classes you've taken/conversations you've had/books you've read. My starting point when I try to help students find a research opportunity is to ask them what topics they have found interesting in their course work. If they can't think of anything related to their classes, I ask them why they chose their major and try to sort out what parts of the discipline are the most interesting to them. In either case, I then try to help them find someone who works in a similar area.

To start this process on your own, first visit the faculty pages of researchers in the department you are most interested in. Faculty pages for the Peabody departments can be found by following the links below. Just click on the faculty member's name to be routed to a description of their research. Most faculty have short descriptions of their research and many also have lab web pages. On lab web pages you can often find more up to date information about what someone is working on and you may also be able to find applications for joining a research lab.

HOD: <https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/people/hod/>

Psych and Human Development:

<https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/people/psych/index.php?group=psych>

SPED: <https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/people/sped/>

Teaching and Learning: <https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/people/tl/index.php?group=tl>

Once you've narrowed down your search to a few people, do a little more research by reading a recent paper from their lab group (so you know more about what they have been working on most recently). Once you have identified a few folks, you should reach out to them. Keep in mind that faculty get a lot of e-mails from students interested in pursuing research with them. Try to avoid writing an e-mail that seems like a form letter (you'll be less likely to get a response). You also want to convey your interest in their research and desire for a chance to work with them without making the message too long. There are a few sample e-mails below, but you should use whatever format feels right to you. Be sure to default to formal address (Professor So-and-So) rather than using first names or Mr./Mrs. You should e-mail more than one person (so that you have some options) and prepare yourself to meet with the professors you e-mail. If you do not hear back from the faculty person after a week. It is okay to e-mail them again. Professors get a lot of emails and sometimes messages get lost in the shuffle.

If you meet with a professor in person make sure you prepare beforehand. Be ready to be asked questions about why you want to join their research project. You may also be asked

about relevant experiences you have had. You should have some questions about what it will be like to work in their lab. Some ideas for things to ask about: Ask what types of activities students they work with do day-to-day. Ask about expectations for hours of work per week. Find out if you will be expected to attend lab meetings and if you will be working with graduate students and post-docs in addition to the faculty member. Ask if there will be opportunities for you to present findings from projects that you work on (at conferences or undergraduate research fairs). You want to convey your interest and enthusiasm while also gathering some information that will help you decide between labs if you luck out and have multiple faculty excited to work with you!

You may also want to talk with your academic advisor if you will be taking research hours for credit. If you need help, they should be able to help you sort out how research experience hours can fit into your academic plan.

Example 1: You took a class with the professor

Professor Saylor,

You may remember I took a Language Development class from you. I really enjoyed hearing about your research! I was wondering if you were looking for research assistants for the fall semester. I found an application to work in your lab online and have attached it here. I hope to hear from you soon.

Thank you,

Megan Jones

Example 2: You read about their research online/learned about similar topics in class

Professor Saylor,

I am hoping to join a research lab for class credit during the Fall semester. I really enjoyed learning about language development in a Psychology of Language class/ I found your lab web page online and think your research on word learning is very interesting. Are you accepting new research assistants for the fall? I have attached your research assistant application here. I hope to hear from you soon.

Thank you,

Megan Jones